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Pollio defends JCPS, questions politicians' motives in final State of the District speech

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In his seventh and [final State of the District address](#), Superintendent Marty Pollio claimed to have gone off-script as he delivered a speech that took aim at the community's and state's false perceptions of Jefferson County Public Schools, while noting the challenges he says are unnecessarily being placed upon urban districts serving students with vast needs.

During the Wednesday ceremony at The Olmsted, which doubled as a fundraiser for the district's scholarship fund, Pollio reflected on his 30 years within Kentucky's largest school system, alleging his speech was not approved by his communications team.

"We have some naysayers out there who have never set foot in a JCPS school," he began, before noting Louisville's continuous obsession with labeling schools "good" or "bad" and the tradition of beginning conversations by asking strangers which high school they attended.

"Unfortunately it's become a pecking order," Pollio said, acknowledging that schools labeled as good often serve more high-achieving students from well-off backgrounds and do not have many students of color. He also took issue with the perception that students must be accepted to magnet schools to receive the best education.

The superintendent, who [retires from the district later this year](#), challenged the audience to question the motivations and perceptions behind individuals who cast judgment on schools as good or bad.

When speaking of the time he's spent in each of the district's 155 schools, Pollio argued he has "a better vision in totality or view of JCPS schools than anyone when we talk about the entire spectrum of K-12." So, he continued, "it's amazing to me that the people who are so critical of this great school district ... have never stepped foot inside JCPS, despite being invited often."

Referencing the [Council of Great City Schools](#), which represents the country's largest urban districts, Pollio alleged JCPS is considered nationally as a leader in urban education, "yet at home, all too often, that is not what you hear."

Pollio mentioned state legislators in Frankfort who have repeatedly introduced [bills aimed at splitting up or taking over JCPS](#), as well as recent federal attacks on public schools across the country that resemble many within Louisville.

The most controversial issue that continues to become more heated, he said, is the fact that "state legislators and our federal government are attacking the [work of racial equity](#) every single day, and it's something that we have focused on in this district for the past eight years."

Equity, Pollio said, is ensuring "that all children have what they need to be successful."

For that, he said, "we get attacked from every angle. ... We are really the only district in the Commonwealth of Kentucky doing this work, so clearly any legislation against equity is focused on Jefferson County Public Schools."

To reduce the achievement gap between Black and white students, Pollio said he and his team have spent his entire administration focused on how to attack the problem from all angles with multiple initiatives and programs. Mostly, he said, they have fought against the continued trend of providing the most resources to schools where children come from homes with the most resources.

Among Pollio's most coined phrases, which he repeated Wednesday, is that kids who come from homes with the least resources need the most amount of resources in their schools.

Still, [achievement gaps have persisted in JCPS](#) and nationwide, which he argued means one of two things.

Either, "this nation believes that Black children cannot achieve at the same level as white children, or there are systemic inequities that have occurred historically and currently that are leading to achievement gaps across this nation," he said, before adding, "Clearly I believe in the latter."

With a [deadline looming to end all diversity, equity and inclusion within schools](#) or risk losing federal funding, Pollio said if schools cannot do this work, they cannot be held accountable for the persisting gap between students of different races.

Pollio also referenced President Donald Trump's "big, beautiful budget," which [passed in the House on Tuesday](#) and is pending a Senate vote. That budget, he says, would strip federal funding from many areas of JCPS' budget that's used to support high-needs students and train teachers.

This would include funding for schools with high rates of poverty, with most JCPS schools falling into that category, as well as for multilingual students who comprise more than 20% of JCPS' enrollment and for those with special education needs.

"I am deeply concerned about the future of public education," Pollio said, asking, "what are we doing if we are not supporting these things in public education?"

Pollio said he's concerned by the increasing needs of JCPS students, with the district seeing higher rates of poverty, significant growth in the number of students learning English and increased rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

"We know, though, that despite all of these needs that kids have, most of our kids in this district see the safest place that they can be is inside a JCPS school," Pollio said.

In his conclusion, Pollio noted what he considered accomplishments of his tenure before listing what he believes will be necessary priorities for his successor.

It is critical, he said, that the next superintendent stay committed to the Academies of Louisville program; continue to have an aligned math and reading curriculum across all schools; keep providing additional resources to high-poverty schools; and maintain an aggressive facilities plan.

Additionally, Pollio argued the community will have to support another tax increase "to fully support staff pay ... if we want to be the district that is fully staffed 10 years from now as others are struggling."

Pollio's tenure leading JCPS ends in July. The superintendent search committee plans to interview final candidates for the position in May in order to execute a contract in June.

If a selection isn't made by then, board members will appoint an interim superintendent. Pollio was first appointed as an interim in 2017 before being hired permanently for the role the following year.

Pollio has not announced what his plans are following the end of his tenure, though he has said he is not ready to retire and would likely work within the public education sector in another form.